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Jane Corbin and Dr Saad Al Fagih quizzed



Ask Jane Corbin and Dr Saad Al Fagih

A Panorama Special reports on Osama Bin Laden, the world's most wanted man. Reporter Jane Corbin, who first investigated Bin Laden in 1998, and Dr Saad Al Fagih of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia answered your questions on the issues raised in the programme.

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Transcript:

Newshost:

Hello and welcome to Panorama interactive. The Panorama special last night was made literally in the wake of last Tuesday's terrorist outrages in the USA.

Its title, as you know, was America's Most Wanted, following President Bush's statement that the Saudi-born Osama Bin Laden was the prime suspect behind the attacks on New York, which destroyed the World Trade Center, and on Washington, upon the Pentagon.

The film consisted of two chronologies - the timetable of the attack itself and interleaved with that the biography of Osama Bin Laden himself, the story of the formation of a terrorist leader. With me to deal with your e-mails on last night's programme are the reporter, Jane Corbin, and Dr Saad Al Fagih of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, whom you'll have seen in the programme.

Jane the first one's to you. It's from Siraj in Hendon: "Are you aware of the BBC or any other media organisation on this planet having seen an iota of evidence from the USA to connect Bin Laden to these atrocities?"

Jane Corbin:

I think the Americans have been careful to say that he's the prime suspect, not that they have incontrovertible evidence. If you saw the programme you will see that we traced the type of network that he has and at the end of the programme we received the first indications that three individuals who are known to be part of his network had actually been traced to the killings. Two Yemenis who'd been associated with the downing of the USS Cole - the American warship - and also one other individual, a Saudi I believe, who is known to have been trained in a Bin Laden camp within the last year or so.

Newshost:

Jane knows but people watching this internet broadcast mayn't realise that all we're doing here is passing on, as we get them, the e-mails that we have received.

Tehseen Khan Barakzai from the UK says: Why does the US insist that Bin Laden is the prime suspect? And he says: "If they have concrete evidence they should give it to the Taleban who are then willing to extradite Bin Laden." Would you like to comment on that?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

This is a comment about an American decision, it's not



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a comment about Arabic mentality or Islamic mentality. Well I assume that the Americans are very far away from considering taking permission from the Taleban. They are not in the mood of waiting for the Taleban to approve or not approve their evidence.

They are very much in the mood of decision to do something regarding this action rather than even wait until this evidence to materialise and become so solid - trial and action on it.

News host:

Jane, Ursula McLean from Manchester says: "Why was there no analysis of Bin Laden's likely guilt or innocence?" I'm quoting the e-mail, I'm not asserting this. "Bin Laden's guilt was taken as a given and the assertion was reinforced by association not analysis." What would you like to say to her?

Jane Corbin:

I don't think we did say that he was definitely guilty, we said he was a prime suspect and we traced the things that have happened in the past. At the moment it's only, what, five days on from the events and there is a lot of information out there and what we're trying to do at this point is process it.

All that we had in the programme last night were the facts that we had managed to check out. So when you say there was no analysis of his guilt or innocence that is something I think that's going to come in the next few weeks or even months.

You know, the very nature of al-Qaeda and the network is it's underground, it's hidden, that's why he's been so successful. It is not something that one can analyse within five days of something like this happening.

News host:

Let's just pause Jane, for a minute, and see once again the moment, in the film, and in Osama Bin Laden's life which Jane assesses as being absolutely critical.

Film clip: Osama Bin Laden's view of America hardened into hatred when the Gulf War brought US troops into Saudi Arabia in 1991. Bin Laden was now living back in Saudi. His homeland was the site of Islam's holy places. Angry already at America's support of Israel, Bin Laden's fury boiled over at what he saw as occupation by the infidel.

News host:

This point - do you agree that from this point on - from the Gulf War - that the die is cast, that the die does lead, effectively, to what happened last week?

Saad Al Fagih:

Very much so. Before the presence of the military forces inside the Arabian peninsula there was a good element of suspicion, a good element of dislike to the Americans in the mind of Bin Laden but to be turned against Americans as they are enemy number one and to plan some sort of operations against them that have started from this moment because he said to himself - I am going to Afghanistan, a foreign country, another country, to expel invading infidel forces. Then what I'm facing now - an invading infidel force inside my own holy country - so that was a strong argument for himself - if I am to be sincere with myself I have to do the same in this case.

News host:

As the film brought out, you know this man, we're asked this in another e-mail: "Why can't steps be taken to prevent Bin Laden from accessing his allegedly vast fortune?" This question comes from New York. "Where does he keep it?" Do we have any answers to that?

It was said in the film that he'd inherited money and that he'd used his money and goes on using his money to finance these operations - how does he keep the money, can we get at the money?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

This is - this is over-simplification of the story of Bin Laden activity. It's also part of the big misunderstanding by the Americans of the Bin Laden phenomena.

Bin Laden money, which was part of his company, he almost lost all of them by confiscation or by freezing by the Saudi authorities - so they are useless for him, they've already been useless. He lost also a big fortune in Sudan because they failed to pay him anything.

So he started after he went back to Afghanistan, when he left Sudan, started almost from scratch. So it's over-simplification to talk about him as using money as everybody does in the West.

News host:

So whose resources then, Jane, are backing these operations if, as the film generally asserted, Bin Laden is in some way controlling the cash behind these operations?

Jane Corbin:

It's true that a lot of the money was confiscated but what he has seen is an injection of new funds from sympathisers, many of them wealthy merchants in Saudi. I think what's not generally understood is that the sympathy that is with him for his cause, if not necessarily the methods - because there certainly have been disputes in the Islamic world about whether what he's done is acceptable to the tenets of the Koran - but certainly I think there's a lot of funding going on and money given from a number of sources.

News host:

A similar question comes from Lesley Welch from Bristol who says: "Surely we have the resource to track his financial dealings and stop them, why don't we do this, why is the only talk about the military response?" Well if the sourcing of the funds is as you say is there any way - is there any way that the funds can be dried up?

Jane Corbin:

Well I think one to say is that it's not necessarily - we're not talking about millions to organise these operations. I think that one of the law enforcement agencies calculated that the bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993, which was the first attempt, probably cost something like \$18,000.

Now obviously that's a lot of money but in terms of whether you're expecting to be spending millions on an operation, it's very low-tech, it's using people, infiltrating them - we're not talking about military hardware here, we're talking about quite cheap operations in the terms of these things.

News host:

Dr Saad two questions which we've received - one from Wales from Pauline Winchester and one from Saj from Birmingham, which one asked and the other one asserts that at one point the Americans, partly through the CIA, financed Osama Bin Laden themselves, presumably when they saw it in their interests when the Russians were in Afghanistan. Is that correct in your view?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Not financing him directly. They have been in line, the same line, as Bin Laden was doing in Afghanistan but there has never been any direct link between him and the CIA.

Interestingly there has never been any direct link between him and the Saudi government. So he has been fully independent since the days of Afghanistan.

News host:

Ok, well that's a very straight answer to that straight question. Michael Curry from London says: "I've read that Bin Laden uses the Islamic equivalent of the Old Testament. How accepted is this interpretation in the Islamic world and what are its tenets?" Though that's a much larger question. Is Bin Laden relying on an accepted interpretation of the holy book?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well most, if not all, Muslim scholars say that killing civilians, especially children and women, is prohibited blankly. But if it is collateral damage it is allowed - if it is in a state of war or deterring an enemy then collateral damage is allowed.

Now some minority of people, including those Jihadic groups, say that if the aggressor is big enemy and it's

difficult to deter him - they use same argument like the Americans - so to stop the Japanese we have to kill 300,000 Japanese, civilian Japanese, by a nuclear bomb - this is the only way to deter the Japanese.

The same comment used by Madame Albright, when she justified killing Iraqi children she said it is a price worth paying - killing 500 children every day. So they use the same argument that to deter an enemy you are allowed to widen the meaning of collateral damage. So they say that we hit the World Trade Centre, those civilians are dead are collateral damages.

Newshost:

I understand. That's a clear and uncomfortable answer to a clear and uncomfortable question. Let's go on now to the prospective response, as well as to the action itself and the question of whether America will feel itself impelled to take military action swiftly, to be seen to be doing something powerful to avenge the shock the country has suffered. The programme, Panorama, ended with a New York paramedic - Mike McMahon - who was talking about his feelings.

Clip from Panorama:

I don't know how the city's ever going to recover from this. So many lives are going to be touched and lost - it's going to be incredible. Just this shame of these people thinking that they're going to go to heaven and all that stuff that are killing us - killing people for no reason, for whatever their reasons are - senseless.

Newshost:

Can you go any further enlightening Hugh from Warwick on the Muslim perspective of preventative solutions to these morbid acts - what can you do now, from a Muslim perspective what can and should be done?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well I think the only perspective things have to be done from the American side. I think the Americans have to understand the whole story in its proper context.

I think the only way to understand it in its context is to deal with it as a very complex phenomena. It's not a matter of a warrior in the mountains, it's a very complex cultural, social and historical phenomena and I have to admit that the Americans are very, very far from understanding it in that context.

If they admit they are a way from understanding it and they wait - they give themselves time - they do not feel led by the emotional feelings and the street feelings, they decide to consult the proper think tanks and the proper research centres and study the whole case in its historical and cultural context I think they can deal with it in the proper way. There are quite a few suggestions to do that but it will take a big list of understandings which will treat the whole problem in its depth.

Newshost:

Jane, Mark Hill from Sheffield asked the basic question: "Do you really think that the US and her allies can fight a war against terrorism like this and win? If it was that easy surely it would have been done already."

Jane Corbin:

Yes I was interested this morning to hear the British Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, say quite openly on the radio that perhaps we didn't take it seriously enough in the past and I think that's probably true. And when I say take it seriously enough - not just in terms of trying to catch people but also perhaps in trying to put right some of the perceived grievances that led to this, which Dr Saad talked about in the programme.

But I think that it will be incredibly difficult and you know one almost sort of quails at the task ahead because the very nature of a network like this is that they are just individuals and they live in a neighbourhood or a society, they move, you know it's very easy to move around now, it's relatively cheap to fly from A to B to C. And I suppose the trade-off will have to be - and I think the Americans are thinking about this - that from being a traditionally open society with open borders and a great sense of civil liberties - they're not going to be like that in the future and I think

- I am worried about the backlash myself.

News host:

Dr Saad, Stan from Ghent in Belgium - and there are a number of questions like this that we've had on the internet - says: "Why does everyone keep thinking that killing Osama Bin Laden will automatically kill his ideas? It will only turn him into a martyr."

I know you don't agree with his perspective at all but do you agree with the threat in that question? Is it the case that if he's killed, literally disposed of, then it will create further Osama Bin Ladens?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

It actually goes more than that. What happened is after the Nairobi bombing the American political machine - the economic machine and the intelligence machine - worked literally as a very successful PR machine for Bin Laden when it mobilised people to rally behind him as a man who is successful as being a proper antagonist to this disturbing, irritating, superpower.

Now that will do the same now. They will be implementing his strategy by mobilising the Western world, the infidel world, against Muslims and that's the way Bin Laden wants it to appear. And I think what is happening now is exactly the way Bin Laden wants it. So Bin Laden - America is working again as a machine to implement Bin Laden's strategy.

News host:

Can I ask you specifically about how the Muslim community could itself deal with this, especially if there's a risk by the wrong action creating a succession of actions and reactions? Amar Upadhyay asks: "If the Muslim community considers the bombings, allegedly planned by Osama Bin Laden, to be un-Islamic then why don't Muslim clerics and Ayatollahs issue a fatwa against Osama and the terrorists? Are those denials of the connection between Islam and terrorism for Western consumption only?"

Perhaps you could help enlighten us. The whole world of fatwas is something little understood, as you understand, outside the Muslim world.

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well many people have already issued - quite a big list of people who have already issued - but the same people, yesterday, issued another fatwa also, although first of all it was condemning the attack, the second fatwa yesterday was a fatwa to stand by and support Afghanistan or Taleban against any aggressor. So although they don't agree with the action on Tuesday they are very clear that backing America is a treason to Islam and indeed it is a duty to stand by the Afghans for Jihad. This is not from one person, it's quite a few credible clergies.

News host:

How, if you're a Muslim, how do you know which - I don't know whether these are considered to be instructions or advice - which of the fatwas, if they conflict or if they offer different advice, which do you follow - how do you know who to follow?

Apparently Osama Bin Laden, the film suggests, gets the backing of a fatwa himself and yet there are other fatwas that seem to point in different directions - where does a Muslim - a religious Muslim - know, think, the true path is meant to lie?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well those two fatwa people don't see them contradicting. You can still don't agree with what he did but attacking a Muslim country or Muslim nation is still an aggression that has to be ...

News host:

But is there a single source of authority for these fatwas or can I pick and choose?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

No in Islam there is nothing like the Vatican as a final source. It's up to the people to hear the fatwa and see which fatwa is more impressive.

Having said that, the general mood on the Muslim street is very, very high with Bin Laden. Whether this is

liked by the West or not is a different story, we are just describing the evidence. The mood in the Muslim street is very high with Bin Laden.

Newshost:

In the Muslim street in the Arab world, in the sub-continent ...

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Mainly in the Arab world, mainly in the Gulf even, mainly in Saudi Arabia itself.

Jane Corbin:

Yes I think what was interesting is that we know that on the West Bank Yasser Arafat's police have been removing video tapes from cameras where film crews are filming large demonstrations of support. And I know today that ...

Newshost:

Support - the support which people were careful to point out was minority support when it happened on the day?

Jane Corbin:

Yes but I think the support, you know, is more widespread and I know that today posters of Bin Laden have started appearing on the West Bank and the police have been taking them down and again confiscating crews who've - video tapes that have filmed this.

And I mean the frightening thing is you'll remember that - it takes me back, as a journalist, who's worked in the Middle East for many years - it takes me back to the remembrance of things like the Bekaa Valley where you got posters of Khomeini and you know the whole thing began to spread and to spread and to spread in a Shia community then - we're actually of course talking about more the Sunni community here. But I think this is something that the Palestinian authorities should be very worried about.

Newshost:

Can I ask you a question about the BBC's responsibility, given the feelings that we're talking about here? Nadeem Akhtar from Walsall asks, Dr Saad I'll put this to you first, he asks: "Was this programme a deliberate attempt by the BBC to fuel the sense of situation that Muslims find themselves in?" Well let's take it that it wasn't but do you take the point of the question?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well this is very much BBC - BBC question.

Newshost:

But do you find, as a Muslim, that what we're doing is tending to inflame - is tending to inflame things or are you content that we're reporting?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well I saw the programme after it was finished, I don't think it is in-...

Newshost:

Inflammatory?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

... inflammatory, I don't think it is.

Newshost:

Jane, you understand, of course, the point of the question. It's a blunt question from, I presume, a Muslim wondering if the BBC is in the business of making a really difficult situation worse.

Jane Corbin:

No I mean our duty in this society, which is a free society with freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of thought, is that we reflect and we report the world that we see about us. And that's what we're doing on the BBC.

I mean we try very hard and we go through our scripts and we speak to the advisors that we have and we hope that we don't use inflammatory language and we hope that we balance the argument - we spend a lot of time doing that. I stand by the film, I don't think it was inflammatory, I think the argument was balanced.

Newshost:

We're asked another question which again we're grateful for any extra guidance. You'll have seen the stories which have appeared in the press, I saw someone reading one on the bus this morning, about Atta and Al-Shehhi having been out for a hard night's drinking in a bar before they took part - or a succession of drinks, depending which particular paper you read - before they went to their martyrdom, as they may have seen it.

The questioner asks, who's Rizwan Ahmed from Southall: "Does that in any manner fit the bill of an Islamic fundamentalist?" And asks rather bluntly: "Either they're Islamic fundamentalists or they aren't."

Well we're grateful for guidance on this. Is it possible to follow something, as it were, strategically and follow Muslim advice and then in your personal life not to exactly follow Muslim advice?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

I mean you can expect somebody to not attend a Mosque, to shave his beard - ok - but you cannot expect him to drink until morning while he's a devoted Muslim, only for the sake of deception. I, for any other sake, I don't think if it proves that those people were drinking really it's almost impossible for them to be among the team.

Newshost:

Really?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Yes.

Newshost:

And would it upset Muslims - would it upset Muslims, the same people who we've been talking about before, you said there was a widespread sympathy throughout the Muslim Arab world if it became generally known and it were believed that they had been out drinking and doing the things which had been reported about them ...

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

They don't take any American information for granted.

Newshost:

No I'm not suggesting they should but you know they can make intelligent judgements themselves and make different judgements.

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well they said either - well they say the same argument: Either this person is not part of the team or the whole operation is done by some other team, by some other perpetrators.

Newshost:

So it wouldn't tend to lessen their sympathy, they would just think that these particular gentlemen must have been exceptions to the rule?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Not even exceptions. This is impossible in their mind. If they have been drinking they are not from Bin Laden team, full stop.

Newshost:

So it becomes - so it becomes a circular argument: That if they did these things then Osama Bin Laden or any fundamentalist group can't have been involved?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Yes.

Newshost:

So they can't - I see. Alright well you asked your question and you got - and you got an interesting answer. Rufus Greenbaum asks: "Do you think Muslim clerics will rescind the fatwa in support of Bin Laden or ordering suicide bombings and declaring the bombers Shahid martyrs?" Do you think they will?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

I don't think they will do that but they already issued fatwas saying that standing by Afghanistan and Taleban is jihad and they said we have ordered people to support Afghani people in the 80s to fight Russia and we will do the same now if they are attacked. But they don't say go on and bomb the same way things happened on Tuesday.

Jane Corbin:

Yes I mean if you remember the Rushdie situation when the fatwa was issued by Iran against Salman Rushdie the writer, long dispute about whether that could ever be rescinded and I think, if I'm right, that it was never rescinded but a different fatwa was ordered, you know, there was talk about offering a different fatwa that somehow would give people an opportunity to choose between them but once the original fatwa was offered - ordered - it was not possible to rescind it.

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

No, controversy in fatwas is there. The person who issued the fatwa could change his mind - he says that I've got some more information which makes me - but I don't think there was any fatwa for what happened on Tuesday. The group itself has its own judgement, enough internal clerics, to decide on their own.

Newshost:

In which case I doubt you'll be able to give a definite answer but nevertheless we have the question - we didn't put the question. Yohan Pathi from London says again that there seems to be varied sentiments - you were only echoing this yourself - varied sentiments to these atrocities among the Muslim population.

"Is it fair to say this is due to various different interpretations of Islam and the Koran?" - well it obviously is, you've told us that - "especially with regards to whether or not it's right to kill people."

Then he goes on to ask his final question: "Can the leadership of Islam, if indeed there is one, unite and clarify this issue to all Muslims?" And this is something that a lot of the questions have in effect been about - can Muslims reasonably expect that their faith should behave as one and give them guidance as one?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well we've got - we've got a very complex structure here. We've got the political leaderships who does not represent proper Muslim leaders, they're not trusted by the people - by the population - as being proper devoted Muslims, they're actually looked at as traitors in the Islamic sense. So they are not trusted themselves to speak on behalf of Islam, they are not also trusted to appoint the proper clerics to help people to choose the proper sentiment for their acts.

So the people have to arrange among themselves in these totalitarian and police regimes some group which gives them leadership - religious leadership - over religious fatwas. And this is always difficult operation because people do not have the proper forums in this secretive and closed and policed community.

So you have to have small pockets of clerics here and small pockets of clerics there who never communicate or have a proper dialogue with each other to reach complete conclusion.

Newshost:

Dr Saad we're nearing the end of our time and I should imagine that everybody watching this and everybody who e-mailed has the same feelings and the same doubts so they probably have this question in their mind at the end of this programme - what do you expect may happen now and what do you expect may be the consequences?

Dr Saad Al Fagih:

Well I don't think the Americans are thinking in the long-term strategic proper cultural, historical context, they are taking the matter in its emotional level, superficial level. I think with this huge rhetoric I don't think a big power like them would say something and then they say no, no we change our mind. I think they are going to attack.

When they attack there will be a big revolt in the Muslim world and the first countries to have impending dangerous effect is the Gulf region. They are very fragile regimes, they are very easy to be brought down, they are easy to go into conflict with their people - especially Saudi Arabia which is a vital country to America. I think the total result will be a big loss to America itself.

Jane Corbin:

Yeah it looks as if America is certainly speaking about attack. I think we have to be careful, we don't know how much of this is for real and how much of it is designed to bring, you know, more people in, particularly Pakistan, as allies to the so-called coalition to fight terror. America's basically saying you're either for terrorism or against it, you know, sign up and be counted.

I think that there must be some in America who are counselling that rather than blast Afghanistan and have the effect that Dr Saad was mentioning of alienating the whole of the Islamic world, you know, they'll be thinking about their options of sort of surgical strike - take him out, try and capture him, kill him in a commando raid.

They rejected that before in 1998, as we explained on the programme, but maybe this time - then they weren't prepared to take American casualties - but maybe this time with well over 5,000 feared dead, America may feel it's worth the risk of losing American soldiers lives to do it that way.

News host:

Jane Corbin the reporter on last night's programme and Dr Saad Al Fagih - an excellent contributor to the programme and to today's discussion of the e-mails we've received - thank you both very much indeed.

That's all from this Panorama interactive and Panorama will be back this coming Sunday at 10.20 on BBC One. Don't miss that and keep the e-mails coming. Bye.

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